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The Attractiveness of City as Place to Live: The Case of Yekaterinburg

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Abstract. Within increasing competition between cities for human resources a problem to enhance attractiveness of urban life is coming to the fore. While planning and designing urban environment major focus is given to the needs and interests of different population groups. Hence, a city should become a place of attracting creative people, individuals and groups which possess special knowledge and skills necessary for promoting, developing and improving an area that could become appealing to business, investors, tourists, etc.. With this purpose much attention should be paid to student-age youth as a potential driver of the area development by transforming a place of residence into an attractive urban environment. The purpose of this study is to analyze how student-age young people of Yekaterinburg perceive and assess attractiveness of the city as a place to live. Yekaterinburg is the biggest Russian industrial city that claims to be the “third” capital (after Moscow and Saint Petersburg). In 2017 we worked out an author’s questionnaire containing 10 questions and conducted a standardized sociological poll of students of Yekaterinburg. 71 men and 129 women aged 18-25 of different academic fields participated in the survey. 42% of poll participants are local residents of Yekaterinburg (they were born in it and live here on a permanent basis), 58% came here from other places (80% of respondents moved to Yekaterinburg to study in higher educational establishments). Research findings showed that Yekaterinburg as a place to live is attractive for students due to a wide range of malls and shops, extended cultural and leisure facilities, opportunities for higher education and self-actualization. Meanwhile, the students pointed out some problem zones of the city like ecological situation, pavement condition, pollution, corruption and impossibility to take part in solving city problems. The young people consider park areas, transport accessibility (subway availability), extended network of cultural and recreational centers to be major attractive factors of urban life. General results of the poll and students’ assessments indicate that a city as a place to live has two facets: a “comfortable” city with parks and gardens, cultural and leisure facilities, conditions for creative self-fulfillment and innovation and an “instrumental” city as a place for career development and material welfare.

1. Introduction

Within increasing urbanization and city competition one of the most topical issues which architects, designers, sociologists, economists and managers face is a problem of creating favorable conditions for attracting individuals with special knowledge which is highly demanded in contemporary post-industrial society [1]. Seeking solution to this problem a significant role is played by planning and designing of urban environment, which should comprise interests and needs of different social groups. A contemporary city is viewed upon as a multilayered human environment which is attractive for living.



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This factor is currently becoming a foundation for attracting and consolidating human resources; it in its turn affects development and attractiveness of the city [2].

City attractiveness is a sum of two components. First of all, these are subjective, evaluative sometimes emotional characteristics containing elements of personal perception of urban dwellers. It is an emotive attitude to a city, a feeling of attachment and even love to it – and this constitutes a basis for territorial identity of a citizen. It happens by means of distinguishing special symbolic places which are imbued with certain meanings [3]. These places form a city image and are represented in a multitude of types of this image in perception of different groups of city dwellers [4]. Hence, attractiveness of the city as a place to live is determined by a subjective attitude towards it based on positive emotions, which are caused by certain places in city environment imbued with a symbolic meaning.

Secondly, the city as a complex organism is defined as an interconnection of different aspects [5]. Therefore, city attractiveness may be characterized from the viewpoint of the facilities which the territory provides to its citizens. The most demanded in contemporary conditions are the facilities to build economic capital of individuals: salary level in relation to a food basket cost, employment and consumer activity, housing affordability. Sociocultural facilities of the territory are represented by the accessibility of education, medical, social, cultural and leisure services which can satisfy a wide range of population needs. Special attention is paid to a safety level of the area, its low index of social tenseness and discrimination as well as its ecological ‘purity’ (air purity, quality of water, a degree of environment pollution by the industrial sectors, presence of park / green spaces).

The above-cited facilities which are the factors of the city attractiveness as a place to live for individuals and groups at the same time represent an urban territorial capital as a system of economic, cultural, social and ecological assets typical of a certain area [6]. These assets facilitate the area development, its competitiveness, encourage an economic and industrial potential of the city, develop its cultural and social spheres, attract human resources. The latter includes highly-qualified specialists, investors, exporters, business and industry representatives, tourists. These social groups promote the area development irregardless of its initial set of resources. Student-age youth is considered to be one of the most perspective groups for the development of urban environment.

2. Materials and Methods

Student-age youth is a potential source of qualified labor, basic human resource of the society, the most dynamic and highly adaptive social group. A student period in life is time of active social, professional, family, personality self-determination, self-searching, life planning, choosing a life path, self-actualization. Students of higher educational establishments act as a highly resourceful social group which is ‘beneficial’ for the city as a nucleus of its dwellers.

The main purpose of our research was an analysis of the city attractiveness as a place to live as it is perceived and assessed by student – age youth. To achieve this aim we formulated a number of objectives. First, to define and characterize students’ feelings towards Yekaterinburg. Secondly, to analyze economic, social, cultural, infrastructural, political, geographical and climatic features of Yekaterinburg as a place to live. Thirdly, to determine factors of the city attractiveness.

Yekaterinburg is Russia’s largest industrial city; its factories perform a function of urban development enterprises. Due to it the city has gained a status of Russian and international major economic, financial and business center. On the one hand, it is a provincial city remote from the central part and Russia’s historical capitals (Moscow and Saint-Petersburg). On the other, it is one of the most perspective megacities of the country, the largest city of the Urals, which claims to be the third capital of Russia. A geographical peculiarity of the city is its location on the borderline of Europe and Asia which contributed greatly to making the city a transport and logistical center of the country, a place of attracting migrations from Siberia and CIS countries. The city is granted opportunities to host important international events (for example, International Industrial Trade Fair, FIFA World Cup 2018).

In 2017 we worked out an author’s questionnaire containing 10 questions and conducted a standardized sociological poll of students (n = 200) of different higher educational establishments of Yekaterinburg (Ural Federal University, Ural State University of Railway Transport, Ural State

Pedagogical University, Russian State Vocational Pedagogical University, Ural State Mining University, Ural State University of Economics, The Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Ekaterinburg State Theatre Institute, Ekaterinburg Academy of Contemporary Art). Survey participants were 71 men and 129 women aged 18-25 of different academic fields: 40% of respondents major in technical and natural history fields, 36% - humanitarian disciplines, 24% - social and economic fields. 42% of poll participants are local residents of Yekaterinburg (they were born in it and live here on a permanent basis), 58% came here from other places (80% of respondents moved to Yekaterinburg to study in higher educational establishments).

3. Results and discussions

An emotional context of personal perception of Yekaterinburg was measured by assessing a feeling of pride in the city. The survey respondents turned out to have split in two equal groups: half of them are proud of the city, half of them – are not. The feeling of pride is prevalent among local residents rather than students who have come to study in Yekaterinburg from other locations.

What are the young people proudest of? Several meaningful contexts can be singled out. First of all, a historical character of the city – historical buildings, architectural monuments, history – associated places. The notion of history is interpreted by survey participants in a broad perspective – as a classical stage of the city foundation and development as well as its modern history connected with particular streams of urban life (history of the Ural rock culture, birthplace of the first President of Russia B.N. Yeltsin, etc.).

Secondly, from the angle of the city importance for the whole country – though traditionally Yekaterinburg is regarded to be an industrial capital of the country (a stronghold of Russia), it is also a cultural and intellectual center. Special attention is paid to developing a cultural and educational center ‘Yeltsin – Center’ which has become a debatable city symbol - as a monument to a controversial epoch of B.N. Yeltsin and innovative cultural site of the city social life. A cultural quarter can be designed here that could add dynamics and value saturation to the city space [7].

Thirdly, active character of urban development, its advancement in many spheres: a tight schedule of cultural events, facilities for youth self – development (master-classes, webinars, sports facilities, etc), a well-developed trading infrastructure, progressive views of young people. A leading role for developing different spheres of urban life is reported to belong to catering enterprises (cafes, bars, restaurants – 83%), cinemas and theatres (61%), availability of goods and services (54%). Finally, city beauty is formed by its architecture (historical center, modern central district with its high-rise buildings, parkland architecture) as well as its natural landscapes, their beauty, well-sustained nature preserves and recreational areas.

Thus, Yekaterinburg possesses a significant potential for shaping highly positive perception by its citizens, has explicit markers of pride in both a material sphere and its social and cultural heritage.

In order to assess attractiveness of the urban life conditions a special scale was worked out, it represents grades from 1 to 4 (1 means the lowest criterion assessment, 4 – the highest one). A system of indicators was a set of questions which provided detailed description of different components of urban conditions. The students gave the highest score to such indicators of attractiveness as an amount of shops and shopping centers (3,62), an opportunity to attend cultural and entertaining events, enjoy cultural leisure activities (3,21), to get education (3,28), to maximize their potential, self – actualize (3,05), a level of cultural establishments, organization of cultural events (3,00), availability of sports and physical training facilities (3,00). The lowest score was given to such indicators as road situation - traffic jams (1,56), environmental health (1,64), road condition (1,79), cleanliness of the city (1,83), level of corruption (1,88), an opportunity to participate in solving city problems (1,95). It is quite predictable that these spheres were not indicated to be the best-developing ones in Yekaterinburg: only 1% of respondents mentioned improvement of the ecological situation and 8% - improvement of the road condition.

It should be emphasized that non - native-born students give higher score for practically all criteria. Thus, taking into consideration a fact that in most cases they move to Yekaterinburg from smaller

settlements (small and middle towns, rural townships, villages) from neighboring less developed areas an important conclusion can be made. While assessing life conditions of some place a great importance should be attached to a comparative context: an experience of living in another residential area helps to compare living conditions, area resources, availability of services and opportunities which the city provides.

In general the survey proved that 84% of students are satisfied with living conditions in Yekaterinburg. However, it seems important to conduct an analysis of factors which affect the city attractiveness. We suggested the students to evaluate such factors of comfortable urban life as: parks / green area, transport accessibility (subway), cultural and recreational centers, architectural development (high-rise buildings), a well-developed network of clubs (bars and night clubs), brand stores and brand catering companies.

The results showed that green walking areas have the utmost significance for students. The idea of the city attractiveness means that the green spaces are becoming not only ecological factor and visual background of the city but also meaningful city spots [8], acquiring individual emotional coloring as they are places for dating, walks with children, sports, etc.. Besides, the green space renders positive influence on psychological and physical state of citizens [9]. Road network and public transport system [10] (including subway in big cities) contributes to solving a problem of availability of intra-city travelling. It is becoming a resource of everyday mobility, which guarantees a dynamic and reliable way to travel within the city. Cultural and recreational centers being one of the basic indicators of the big cities, provide opportunities for students to practice all functional leisure activities – recreational, socializing, communicative, etc.

The students indicated that the least important factors of the city as a place to live are, firstly, high-rise buildings. Secondly, clubs and bars which are becoming a ‘third place’ now [11]. Thirdly, they mentioned brand clothes and footwear stores and brand cafes and restaurants - the markers of globalization processes and city inclusion into international space of communication that help to create a feeling of belonging to world fashion trends.

The students consider opportunities for professional growth (61%) and high salary (49%) to be the key factors that can determine a choice of a living place. It undoubtedly fits within actualized needs of the given social and demographic group. However, while making this choice they are ready to ‘sacrifice’ factors of cultural environment (only 29% of respondents will focus on them) and conditions for development and creative activity (21%).

4. Conclusions

On the basis of the research the following conclusions can be made. First, the survey results helped to reveal the following contradiction. Student-age youth perceive a city as a phenomenon having two facets (two images). The first one is a ‘comfortable’ city with green areas, well-developed cultural and recreational environment open for innovations and creativity. The second one is an ‘instrumental’ city as a basis for career development, material welfare. In this case a city can be functionally effective rather than emotionally attractive. Secondly, as the city is a place attracting individuals with special knowledge which is required in modern post-industrial society a need to respond to needs and demands of these groups is coming to the fore. Student-age people are a potential driver of developing the urban environment and attracting significant resources in future. Hence, in order to enhance the city attractiveness it is necessary to make ecological, economic, sociocultural stability major strategic directions of policy in the sphere of planning and designing of urban space [12]. Already today municipal administration as an agent that initiates, implements and regulates complex strategies of improving the area attractiveness [13] should take into account both territorial capital of the city and typical needs of target social groups which contribute to the city development especially those who can be defined as a creative class. At the same time, it is required to work out some form of balance in distributing resources: preserving human capital, attracting the creative class and developing industrial capacities of the city [14].

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